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## Brain Science Draws Strong Bipartisan Interest in Tough Budget Times

By Kerry Young, CQ HealthBeat Associate Editor

With Congress committed to keeping a tight rein on the federal government's operating expenses, powerful lawmakers this week have tried to build a strong case for increased spending on brain research. It won't be easy.

Chaka Fattah of Pennsylvania, the ranking Democrat on the House Commerce-Justice-Science Appropriations panel, got the subcommittee to kick off its public work on the fiscal 2015 budget Thursday with a hearing on neuroscience. This followed a Wednesday Senate Appropriations subcommittee hearing on the costs of Alzheimer's disease. Senate Appropriations Chairwoman Barbara A. Mikulski, D-Md., whose father died of the illness, has been among the lawmakers most active in lobbying for more research into Alzheimer's and other brain diseases.

Republicans too have argued for the need for more neuroscience research, which is needed in part to aid the many veterans who sustained traumatic brain injuries in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At Thursday's hearing, John Culberson, R-Texas, a member of that panel as well as the chairman of the House Military Construction-Veterans Affairs Appropriations subcommittee, implored officials from National Science Foundation and White House Office on Science and Technology Policy to quickly make clear what kind of funding the VA may need for brain research. He expects to produce his fiscal 2015 MilCon-VA spending bill in the next few weeks.

"We are very fortunate to have many neuroscience champions in the policymaking community, which frankly we were lacking 20 years ago," Alan Leshner, chief executive of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, told the panel Thursday.

Current budget law keeps a tight rein on the federal government's discretionary spending.

Top scientists say the National Institutes of Health is missing out on opportunities to fund brain research. NIH Director Francis S. Collins on Wednesday told the Senate Labor-Health and Human Services-Education Appropriations subcommittee that people with research ideas for Alzheimer's currently have about a one in six chance of getting funded, which means five out of six walk away with nothing. (See related story, CQ News, Feb. 26, 2014)

Other nations, such as Japan, have been seeking to make advances in neuroscience, Leshner said. These rivals of the United States are viewing the current tepid funding for science as an opportunity to make gains on the United States, still considered the world's leader in brain research, he said.

"I believe that American preeminence in science is at risk," Leshner said. "The budgets in this country in constant dollars have been falling, as other countries are increasing their investments."

Fattah spent much of last year trying to nudge up federal spending on brain research, and counts as a victory the inclusion of about \$14 million in the fiscal 2014 spending package (PL 113-76) for a new cross-agency in cognitive science and neuroscience research. He also had instructions attached to the bill that direct the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy to seek new opportunities for international neuroscience collaboration.

Fattah urged NSF and White House Office of Science and Technology Policy officials to be bold in their demands for neuroscience research. He noted that this is a cause also championed by global leaders, including President Barack Obama, who last year at the White House announced a planned roughly \$100 million brain initiative.

Fattah and Frank Wolf, R-Va., the chairman of the House C-J-S Appropriations subcommittee, both stressed the need for international collaboration in neuroscience. Wolf wondered if there might be a benefit in a project akin to the International Space Station for global neuroscience research. He even raised the idea of including a nation of which he has been highly critical for many years about alleged spying and human rights abuses.

“We could even involve the Chinese on this,” Wolf said, drawing laughter from the audience.

*Kerry Young can be reached at [kyoung@cq.com](mailto:kyoung@cq.com).*

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